Summer 6-1-1998

The John Muir Newsletter, Summer 1998

The John Muir Center for Regional Studies

The JOHN MUIR NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 3 SUMMER 1998

JOHN MUIR ON MOUNT RITTER: A NEW WILDERNESS AESTHETIC

BY PHILIP G. TERRIE

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While John Muir has been the subject of considerable scholarly scrutiny in recent years, we have yet to arrive at a complete understanding of his response to nature.[1] One reason is that we are often too eager to portray him as a radical, late twentieth century environmentalist; radical he was, but in his time and place. Another problem — and the one to be addressed here — is the failure to put his narratives into the context of nineteenth century American wilderness literature, of which there is a substantial canon. Muir was writing in the framework of an established tradition, and one of the more radical features of his own narratives is the way they depart from the conventions of that tradition. Except for the 1984 study by Michael P. Cohen, I know of no serious effort to understand Muir in the larger context of nineteenth-century wilderness literature.

Beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century, literate Americans showed an increasing fascination with their wilderness. Eventually this interest evolved its own distinct literature, which existed on both a popular and an elite cultural level. Examples of these would be Joel T. Headley's *The Adirondack: Or, Life in the Woods,* published in 1849, a book which was reissued, reprinted, expanded, and plagiarized in numerous editions over a period of some thirty-five years, and Thoreau's *The Maine Woods,* published in 1864. I have written elsewhere about the conventions of this literature and cannot describe them in much detail here, but it is important to summarize their aesthetic traditions because this article argues that John Muir was intentionally departing from the accepted, and was thus adding an imaginative and radically new dimension to wilderness literature and aesthetics.[2]

A key element of the romantic response to wilderness was the characteristically turgid reaction to scenery. Invoking the aesthetic vocabulary of Edmund Burke, romantic travelers used Burke's categories of the sublime and the beautiful to reduce the American wilderness to something familiar that they could appreciate.[3] The Burkean aesthetic, in its emphasis on the scenic and pictorial, encouraged a distinction between scenery and wilderness. When romantic travelers encountered landscapes which failed to fit the Burkean scheme of the sublime and the beautiful or the later distillation of these under the rubric of the picturesque, their disgust at discovering phenomena such as thick woods, dead trees, swamps, or barren mountains emphasizes how the appeal of the cult of scenery was its usefulness in mediating between the romantic consciousness and the reality of nature.

Romantics were searching for *scenes,* for certain arrangements of water, rocks, or trees. When they found what they were looking for, they responded enthusiastically. But when the reality of nature disappointed them, they were often dismayed and disoriented. Romantics were especially dispirited by the omnipresence of death in nature, by the usually unacknowledged implication that nature was constantly changing. Unlike scenes, which were static, nature was in process. Hence even so sensitive a romantic as Thoreau could be horrified by the sense of the inhospitality of nature he perceived on Mount Katahdin. Thoreau's disorientation stemmed from his discovery that nature was indeed in flux and not permanent and scenic.[4] Thoreau, at least, honestly confronted his feelings at finding untrammeled nature to be something considerably more complex, not to say threatening, than the two-dimensional nature of mere scenery, and he showed his loss of psychological equilibrium in the broken syntax of his well-known description of the Katahdin wilderness. But most other romantics either denied the reality of nature by converting it to word pictures or simply rejecting it altogether when they deemed it lacking.

Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* supplies a typical example of the romantic response to nature as scenery. Greatly excited by the wilderness of the West, Parkman filled this famous travel narrative with detailed, magnificently composed word-pictures. But they are little more than that. To Parkman nature is to be appreciated in terms of what appeals to the eye and to visual associations, but it is never a dynamic combination of geological, biological, and other processes. Thus on a valley of the Arkansas River, Parkman reduces the reality of nature to a two-dimensional picture: there he encounters "a beautiful scene, and doubly so to

(continued on page 3)

A HALF-CENTURY OF THE CALIFORNIA HISTORY INSTITUTE, AND BEYOND

The California History Institute, first organized after World War II, held one of its largest and most successful conferences in April of this year. It focused on one of its recent themes, the Pacific Rim, and was the third in its series of Pacific Centuries conferencea. Two dozen sessions were held over three days. Sessions were on China in World History and also Russia and the Pacific. A series of sessions focused onChinos and Filipinos as immigrants to Mexico and the United States, Japanese and Okinawan immigration, forced relocation and migration, race, immigration and labor, and migration and memory in the visual arts. Other sessions were on responses to environmental disasters, the history and politics of timber, Africans in the Pacific, and gold rushes in the U.S. and the South Pacific in fact and in fiction. Another series of sessions was concerned with galleons, merchantmen and geopolitics, money and banking and the China connection, exports from the Americas, money and the Philippines in the colonial Mexican era, the Philippines in 1898, transnationalism in the Pacific Islands, and religion, race and imperialism. Finally, other sessions were concerned with such topics as international voluntary services in wartime Indochina, modern youth culture across the Pacific, history through biography, and contemporary issues in the North Pacific.

A keynote address by Jerry H. Bentley of the University of Hawaii was on alternatives to national history. Another keynote session was led by Robert Monagan of the World Trade Council and Chair of the UOP Board of Regents. It featured Tapan Munro of Pacific, Gas and Electric Co. who discussed the importance of heritage, community and quality of life for business. A concert of music from across the Pacific concluded Saturday's full academic events.

The 150 participants in the conference hailed not only from California and many other states, but also from other countries. Participants came from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, France, the Netherlands, and formerly independent Hong Kong.

This was one of the most successful conferences ever held by the California History Institute. It is anticipated that a volume featuring some of the most outstanding presentations will be published.

ANOTHER MUIR ANTHOLOGY SOON AVAILABLE FROM THE JOHN MUIR CENTER

As announced in a recent issue, the Center staff has been preparing a volume on John Muir which is based on the presentations made to the California History Institute in 1996. Entitled *John Muir in Historical Perspective,* the volume is being published by Peter Lang Inc., a New York firm, and will be available in early 1999. This is a volume of fourteen essays on aspects of John Muir's life and work that readers of this newsletter will want to read. The Center hopes to secure a supply of discounted copies. The next newsletter issue will announce details on price and availability of the volume.

PUBLICATION NOTES

J. Parker Huber's article, "John Muir and Thoreau's Cape Cod," appeared in *The Concord Saunterer*, New Series, V (Fall, 1997), 133-54. Parker writes that he is working on a selection of Thoreau's writings on mountains for future publication.

Mountaineering Essays, by John Muir, edited and with an introduction by Richard Fleck. Paper, $10.95.

The University of Utah Press recently announced the reprinting of this collection of eleven Muir essays. For further information contact Aimee Ellis, Marketing Manager, University of Utah Press, 1795 E. South Campus Drive, Room 101, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, (801) 585-9786; FAX (801) 581-3365.

BBC SCOTLAND DEVELOPING MUIR SERIES

A six-part series of radio programs is being developed by BBC Scotland for broadcast this fall, according to Anna Magnusson, BBC producer who visited the Holt-Atherton Library and Yosemite this summer. The broadcast will include interviews and perspectives on Muir's global impact. For further information contact the producer at her e-mail address anna.magnusson@bbc.co.uk .

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PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY
THE JOHN MUIR CENTER FOR REGIONAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC, STOCKTON, CA 95211

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our eyes, so long accustomed to deserts and mountains. Tall woods lined the river, with green meadows on either hand; and high bluffs, quietly basking in the sunlight, flanked the narrow valley." A Mexican and a herd of cattle "made a very pleasing feature in the scene."[5]

For Parkman the search for pleasing scenes constitutes part of what draws a genteel traveler like himself to the western wilderness in the first place. Every gentleman learns the proper response to scenery along with Latin and aristocratic manners. But when the western landscape fails to satisfy conventional aesthetics, the traveler finds it deficient, or even repugnant. Overlooking a valley of the Platte, a disappointed Parkman declares the view to have "not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any of the features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude and its wilderness. For league after league, a plain as level as a frozen lake, was outspread beneath us; here and there the Platte, divided into a dozen thread-like sluices, was traversing it, and an occasional clump of wood, rising in the midst like a shadowy island, relieved the monotony of the waste." Parkman goes on to add that some positive associations are to be found in this place, but they are a function of the virtues of rugged individualism putatively fostered by life in such a destitute landscape and not of the inherent appeal of an untouched wilderness.

Later, on the high prairie, in another landscape for which conventional aesthetics have not prepared him, Parkman declares, "If a curse had been pronounced upon the land, it could not have worn an aspect of more dreary and forlorn barrenness." Similarly, in the mountains near Laramie, Parkman again condemns the scenery for failing to satisfy the criteria of the cult of the sublime. "There was nothing in their appearance either grand or picturesque, though they were desolate to the last degree, being mere piles of black and broken rock, without trees or vegetation of any kind."[6]

Parkman's response to the wilderness reflected the taste of his culture. Similar depictions can be found in virtually any of the hundreds of popular travel narratives written in the nineteenth century. They vary in the degree of the horror experienced on confronting wild scenery that was neither sublime nor beautiful, but their fundamental insistence on either reducing the reality of the landscape to a subject for aesthetic appreciation or dismissing it as useless is pervasive. That Parkman repeatedly finds such landscapes "dreary," "forlorn," or "desolate," moreover, illustrates the romantic tendency to reject those features of the wilderness suggesting mortality; the absence of the cheerful, georgic, and life-sustaining qualities perceived along the Arkansas make the desert or prairie or barren peak especially unappealing. In the same way, romantic travelers encountering swamps or bogs, where dead trees and an oppressive sense of process characterized the scene, often withdrew in horror and used the same vocabulary: the words "dreary" and "desolate" were applied to both deserts and swamps — anything failing to be conventionally scenic.

It was against this tradition that John Muir was rebelling. Muir's intellectual debt to the romantics, chiefly Emerson, is well known. He never abandoned the Emersonian belief in the transcendence to be found in nature. But what is to be emphasized here is how Muir rejected the romantic inclination to dwell on scenes and suggested instead that the truly transcendent appreciation of nature occurred only when one opened his or her perceiving faculties to all of nature. Muir often pointed out the inadequacy of conventional aesthetics in appreciating the true meaning of the wilderness. In describing the various landscapes of the California wilderness, Muir frequently lamented that a desert or a bog or some other scene would be ignored by most people. Writing about the high glacial lakes, he says, "At first sight, they seem pictures of pure bloodless desolation, miniature arctic seas, bound in perpetual ice and snow." Phrases like "at first sight" appear over and over again in Muir: in each case he avers that the untrained eye, dictated to by conventional aesthetic standards, misses much of nature. Describing the high passes, he declares that the ordinary traveler would find them "cold, dead, gloomy," but that the person who truly sees finds them to be among "the finest and most telling examples of Nature's love." "At first sight," writes Muir of Red Lake, "it seems rather dull and forbidding."[7]

Muir's message was that we should learn to appreciate all of nature and not be shackled by convention. The wilderness aesthetic advanced by Muir is a liberating way of perceiving nature.[8] It permits us to find pleasure in forms of nature hitherto despised. Of course, Muir continued to insist on the kind of transcendent value in nature which had appealed to the romantics of the previous generation. His narratives are full of reveries and transcendental moments inspired by the divinity of nature. But to this Muir added the further perception and appreciation of nature's processes. To Muir the discovery of process was the key to the transcendental experience. Muir explicitly argued that the clearest perception of nature combined the spirituality of the transcendentalist with the discriminating eye of the scientist.

Much of the Sierra consists of spectacular scenery quite within the conventions of traditional aesthetics. But here, too, Muir declared, new eyes, new ways of perceiving the landscape led to deeper understandings. One of the best examples of this is his often-anthologized and much-discussed description of the view from Mount Ritter. In this chapter of *The Mountains of California,* Muir describes the events of a period of a few days in October in the early 1870s. At the outset, he is descending from one of his expeditions in the high country, pondering the wonders of the landscape. He then encounters two artists looking for the picturesque, leads them to a high meadow, and sets out for a solo climb of Mount Ritter. The title of the chapter on Mount Ritter, "A Near View of the High Sierra," announces Muir's intention to emphasize aesthetics and the importance of reexamination of the way we perceive nature, with the words "Near View" suggesting the need to look at nature more closely. "To artists," he says, implying the inadequacy of current values in appreciating the true glories of the California mountains, "few portions of the High Sierra are, strictly speaking, picturesque." Artists miss the total meaning of nature by trying to compartmentalize it: "The whole massive uplift of the range is one great picture, not clearly divisible into smaller ones."[9]

To underscore yet further his intention to develop a new aesthetic, Muir describes himself early in the chapter responding to a particular view as if he too were a merely pictorial artist: "Pursuing my lonely way down the valley, I turned again and again to gaze on the glorious picture, throwing up my arms to enclose it as in a frame. After long ages of growth in the darkness beneath the glaciers, through sunshine and storms, it seemed now to be ready for the elected artist, like yellow wheat for the reaper; and I could not help wishing that I might carry colors and brushes with me on my travels, and learn to paint." But as he goes on to demonstrate, it is not via paint and brushes that one truly captures the landscape; it is through the deeper acceptance of nature's processes. In the rest of the episode he shows that he is indeed the "elected artist," and he further shows the irrelevance of accepted aesthetic norms by introducing immediately after the scene just quoted a pair of artists seeking scenery "suitable for a large painting." By thus displacing the urge to capture the scene in a painting onto the artist, Muir thus explicitly sets up a contrast

between their perceptions and his, and suggests that his response to nature is an evolving one while theirs is static.[10]

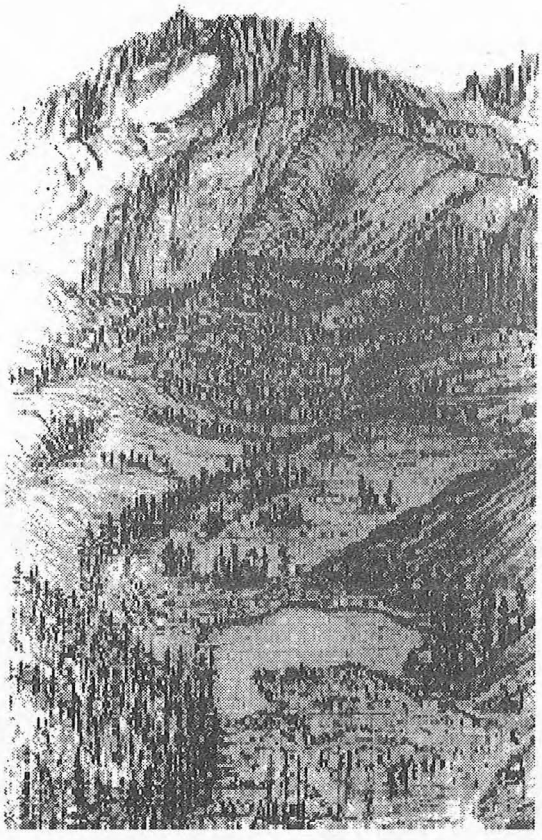
Muir agrees to guide the artists back into the high country and wastes little time in showing the superiority of his perceptions to theirs. He rapturously describes the autumn colors: "the intense azure of the sky, the purplish grays of the granite, the red and browns of dry meadows, and the translucent purple and crimson of huckleberry bogs." None of this satisfies the unnamed artists, however, who find the scenery "disappointing" and lament that they see " 'nothing as yet at all available for effective pictures.' "[11]

When Muir and his painters finally come upon a truly startling view, their respective responses reveal profoundly different attitudes toward nature: the artists scurry about "choosing foregrounds for sketches," while Muir decides to undertake a perilous mid-October ascent of a previously unclimbed peak. The artists are trapped in a sense of nature as scenery, while Muir embraces an opportunity to enter into nature. The anticipated dangers of such an adventure "only exhilarate the mountaineer," and early the "[n]ext morning, the artists went heartily to their work and I to mine."[12]

During the two days it takes Muir to reach Ritter, he describes the scenery in conventional vocabulary. To the south at one point, he spots a group of "savage peaks." The twilight renders a "sublime scene," while that night "[s]omber peaks, hacked and shattered, circled half-way around the horizon, wearing a savage aspect." Invoking a Ruskinian vocabulary, he describes a "wilderness of crumbling spires and battlements."[13]

Shortly before reaching the summit, Muir endures a memorable scrape with death. Trying to scale a sheer cliff, he finds himself suddenly unable to locate another hand-hold: "After gaining a point about half-way to the top, I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I must fall." Then a burst of new energy rushes through him: "I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense." With renewed vigor he scrambles to the summit. The language of the entire affair suggests that this brief encounter with his own mortality has been a truly spiritual experience. There he is, hugging the cliff as if crucified, fearing his own imminent death, when "The other self, bygone experiences, instinct, or Guardian Angel, — call it what you will, — came forward and assumed control. . . . Had I been home aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete."[14]

In addition to other possibilities, this episode seems to encapsulate Muir's argument favoring the need for new perceptions, responses to nature moving beyond the conventions of romantic wilderness literature. The essential ingredient in the new response is an acceptance of nature's processes, of which the death of the individual creature is the most profound and the most difficult to embrace.[15] Muir uses this episode to indicate what he already knows: that death is ubiquitous in nature and that one of the reasons why conventional aesthetics failed to comprehend all of nature was the reluctance of romantics to acknowledge the inevitability of transience and process. The epiphanic nature of the experience explains the radical change in vocabularly and overall response adopted soon after he reaches the top.



MT. RITTER, BY JOHN MUIR

Once on the summit, he retreats momentarily to a Ruskinian vocabulary emphasizing architectural detail: one peak is a "gigantic castle with turret and battlement," another a "Gothic cathedral more abundantly spired than Milan's." He quickly drops this stock vocabulary and notes yet again how the scenery hides its deepest meanings from the untrained eye. Neither mysticism nor conventional aesthetics is enough to elicit the truth of the landscape. The eye of empiricism provides the ingredient needed for total perception, and the process of glaciation explains the hitherto unintelligible. In the following long quotation, a reader may note the emphasis on accurate perception and on the glacier as the chief symbol of the natural processes creating the landscape.

[W]hen looking for the first time from an all-embracing standpoint like this, the inexperienced viewer is oppressed by the incomprehensible grandeur, variety, and abundance of the mountains rising shoulder to shoulder beyond the reach of vision; and it is only after they have been studied one by one, long and lovingly, that their far-reaching harmonies become manifest. Then, penetrate the wilderness where you may, the main telling features, to which all the surrounding topography is subordinate, are quickly perceived, and the most complicated clusters of peaks stand revealed harmoniously correlated and fashioned like works of art — eloquent monuments of the ancient ice-rivers that brought them into relief from the general mass of the range. The cañons, too, some of them a mile deep, mazing wildly through the mighty host of mountains, however lawless and ungovernable at first sight they appear, are at length recognized as the necessary effects of causes which followed each other in harmonious sequence Nature's poems carved on tables of stone — the simplest and most emphatic of her glacial compositions.[16]

The glacier, then, the crucial symbol in Muir's aesthetic, produces the geological process which unifies and explains the landscape, and contemplating it leads to a moment of supreme transcendence. It is interesting to note that Muir was the first to suspect the existence of living glaciers in the Sierra, and that he

deduced their existence on the basis of his personal examination of the landscape.[17] When he did discover actual glaciers, they confirmed the value of his empirical powers. The landscape makes sense only in terms of the glacier; grasping this explanation in turn leads to a discovery of "Nature's poems," the imaginative correlation of Nature's harmonies.

Muir goes on to contemplate further the significance — both geological and mystical — of the glacier. Thinking about the eons required for glacial action to produce the landscape before him, he transcends ordinary time:

Could we have been here to observe during the glacial period, we should have overlooked a wrinkled ocean of ice as continuous as that now covering the landscapes of Greenland; filling every valley and cañon with only the tops of the fountain [sic] peaks rising darkly above the rock-encumbered ice-waves like islets in a stormy sea — those islets the only hints of the glorious landscapes now smiling in the sun. Standing here in the deep brooding silence all the wilderness seems motionless, as if the work of creation were done.

The shift in tense and mood here is critical. The passage begins in a conditional past tense; then the condition of the introductory clause is imaginatively satisfied, and the verbs become present indicative. Muir imagines himself back in the glacial era.

But in the midst of this outer steadfastness we know there is incessant motion and change. Ever and anon, avalanches are falling from yonder peaks. These cliff-bound glaciers, seemingly wedged and immovable, are flowing like water and grinding the rocks beneath them.[18]

Inspired spiritually by contemplation of one of nature's most awesome processes, Muir speeds up time so that a glacier seems to move like water.[19] The imagination, properly aware of process, supplies the understanding of the landscape unavailable to conventional aesthetics. Elevating his imagined account of the shaping of the landscape even further, Muir embraces the transience of the scene before him, finding in that very mutability the essence of all of nature's meaning.

The lakes are lapping their granite shores and wearing them away, and every one of these rills and young rivers is fretting the air into music, and carrying the mountains to the plains. Here are the roots of all the life of the valleys, and here more simply than elsewhere is the eternal flux of nature manifested. Ice changing to water, lakes to meadows, and mountains to plains. And while we thus contemplate Nature's methods of landscape creation, and, reading the records she has carved on the rocks, reconstruct, however imperfectly, the landscapes of the past, we also learn that as these we now behold have succeeded those of the pre-glacial age, so they in turn are withering and vanishing to be succeeded by others yet unborn.[20]

In Muir's descriptions of the Sierra, the function of the glacier achieved divine status. The existence of glaciers, either in the present or in the remote geological past, explained everything. All rock formations, from the tiniest striations to the grandeur of Yosemite's Half Dome, were "glacier monuments." Whenever Muir employed the Ruskinian vocabulary of Gothic architecture, the sculptor was the glacier. In addition to determining the location of lakes, meadows, and streams, the courses of ancient glaciers also accounted for the distributions of such apparently unrelated phenomena as certain tree species and a particular kind of mountain squirrel. Indeed, insisted Muir, "The key to this beautiful harmony [meaning all the perfection of animate and inanimate nature] is the ancient glaciers." The glacier was Muir's key to beginnings and ends, to the endless cycles of life and death. The essential lesson of the glacier is that nature is never static, that all things visible eventually pass away to be succeeded by subsequent forms or generations. Muir, in a way impossible for the antebellum romantic traveler, accepted process and by implication accepted the concept of cyclical time. Whereas the romantic thought in terms of linear time which began at the creation and proceeded toward a divinely appointed end, Muir was able to imagine time in terms of endlessly repeating cycles. Muir's sense of time, in other words, was more natural, based on a keen observation of how natural process dictates a reality wherein life depends on death and decay.

In nearly all his descriptions of the natural phenomena of the Sierra, Muir advanced this notion of cycles. He dwelt on how the cycles of the year are both beautiful and, simultaneously, dependent on death. At a glacial meadow:

In June small flecks of the dead, decaying sod begin to appear, gradually widening and uniting with one another, covered with creeping rags of water during the day, and ice by night, looking as hopeless and unvital as crushed rocks just emerging from the darkness of the glacial period. . . . The ground seems twice dead. Nevertheless the annual resurrection is drawing near.

The lakes themselves go through a similar cycle of life, decay, and death:

. . . while its shores are being enriched, the soil-beds creep out with incessant growth, contracting its area, while the lighter mud particles deposited on the bottom cause it to grow constantly shallower, until at length the last remnant of the lake vanishes, — closed forever in ripe and natural old age. And now its feeding-stream goes winding on without halting through the new gardens and groves that have taken its place.[21]

In contrast, the notion of a lake turning boggy was repugnant to the romantic traveler.

With Muir, as with Emerson, vision is the crucial faculty. Like most romantics Emerson believed that children, uncorrupted by worldly concerns, have a purer, more honest perception of nature than adults have. "Few adult persons," insisted Emerson, "can see nature," and he further declared that any disaster was tolerable except the loss of sight.[22] But Muir was thinking of a way of seeing purer than that attributed by Emerson even to children. Muir was able to see both the transcendent essence of nature as well as the objective reality. Indeed, it was his fascination with all the details and processes of nature which led him to his transcendent moments. In a passage reminiscent of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" conceit, Muir emphasizes the importance of the faculty of sight, stresses both the mystic and the substantive, and suggests how sight properly exercised leads to a moment of unity with nature: exploring a glacial meadow, "notwithstanding the scene is so impressively spiritual, and you seem dissolved in it, yet everything about you is beating with warm, terrestrial human love and life substantial and familiar. . . . You are all eye, sifted through and through with light and beauty."[23]

Returning from Ritter to his neglected painters, Muir notes one final time how their response to nature falls short of his. Upon their first seeing him, "They seemed unreasonably glad to see me." They have been fretting about Muir's safety, uncomfortable with the possibility of death in the wilderness. Their apprehensions have ruined their tranquility and prevented them from appreciating their opportunity to immerse themselves in the wilderness. Once their guide is safely back with them, Muir notes, with some condescension, "their curious troubles were over." As they prepare to descend from the mountains, he adds, now with overt sarcasm, "They packed their precious sketches."[24]

NOTES

1. Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1981); Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Frederick Turner, *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours* (New York, NY: Viking, 1985). On the need for more work on Muir, see Frederick Turner, "Toward Future Muir Biographies, Problems and Prospects," *Pacific Historian* 29 (Summer/Fall, 1985): 157-66.

2. Joel T. Headley, The *Adirondack; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York, NY: Baker and Scribner, 1849); Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); Philip G. Terrie, *Forever Wild: Environmental Aesthetics and the Adirondack Forest Preserve* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1985), pp. 44-67. See also, among others, Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 30-53, 71-104; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,1983), pp. 44-66; Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagra Falls:Icon of the American Sublime* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 41-125.

3. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958).

4. Thoreau, *The Maine Woods,* pp. 69-71. For a good analysis of Thoreau's experience on Katahdin, see James McIntosh, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 179-215.

5. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (New York, NY: The Penguin American Library, 1982), p. 378. This edition of Parkman's narrative follows the original 1849 version, published by George P. Putnam.

6. Parkman, pp. 105-106, 228, 333.

7. John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1977), pp. 258-79, 285.

8. The wilderness aesthetic advanced by Muir bears a striking resemblance to Aldo Leopold's land ethic; see J. Baird Callicott, "The Land Aesthetic," *Environmental Review* 7 (Winter 1983): 345-58.

9. Muir, p. 49.

10. Muir, pp. 50, 51; Cohen, pp. 70-80, 242-43, discusses in detail Muir's account of the ascent of and the view from Mount Ritter. Cohen finds, as I do, that Muir reached the summit with an "awakened consciousness" as he writes on p. 71, and that Muir intentionally contrasted his aesthetic with that of the two artists. But Cohen does not attribute the distinction, as I do, to Muir's awareness of process.

11. Muir, pp. 51, 52.

12. Muir, p. 53.

13. Muir, pp. 55, 57, 63.

14. Muir, pp. 64, 65.

15. Cohen, p. 70.

16. Muir, pp. 68, 69.

17. For a discussion of the spiritual significance of the glacier in Muir's scheme of nature, see Paul D. Sheats, "John Muir's Glacial Gospel," *The Pacific Historian* 29 (Summer/Fall 1985): 42-53. Sheats also notes the importance of Muir's scientific training in his later response to nature, observes Muir's conviction that too many people "failed to recognize the true order of a mountain landscape," and points to the glacier as the key to seeing nature's "essential harmony" (49). Sheats does not discuss the Mount Ritter episode, however. On Muir's hypothesizing on the existence of Sierra glaciers and his subsequent discovery of them, see Fox, pp. 20-25. One of the chief influences on Muir in his thinking about the role of natural processes in shaping the landscape was probably George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature; Or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1864). Marsh argued that all of nature's parts were interdependent and that new life or growth always depended on death and decay. While Marsh's primary aim in writing *Man and Nature* was to wam mankind against upsetting the capacity of nature to satisfy agricultural needs, his work has important aesthetic implications, which I believe Muir was virtually the first to recognize. See my discussion of Marsh in *Forever Wild,* pp. 81-86.

18. Muir, p. 69.

19. Cohen, p. 74. The chief distinction between Cohen's reading of this episode and mine is that whereas Cohen (with logic I do not question) sees it as part of a spiritual journey, I want to add to that what I believe to have been Muir's calculated effort to replace conventional aesthetics with his own more comprehensive wilderness aesthetic.

20. Muir, pp. 69-70.

21. Muir, pp. 133, 104.

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04), Vol. 1, P. 9.

23. Muir, p. 128.

24. Muir, p. 73.

A LETTER TO MR. JOHN MUIR

(Editor's note: Bob Engberg wrote this letter on the occasion of Muir's 150th birthday in 1988. It first appeared in **Hi Sierra**, *the newsletter of the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club. It is reprinted here by permission of the author.)*

Dear John,

I was asked to write to you by a nice group of folks here in San Diego. We're celebrating your birthday, John. In case you've lost count you'll be 150 years old this month.

You'll be glad to know people here are making quite a fuss about the event. I suppose you might be a little embarrassed by it all, but people think you are mighty important. A few years ago one group voted you the "Outstanding Californian" of the last one hundred years — this despite the fact that many Californians have made more money than you ever did, and one or two have gone on to hold some of the nation's highest offices. Yours was a different kind of wealth, though, and one much longer lasting than bank deposits and tenures in office.

And there are all sorts of things named after you, John. Of course you know about the Muir Glacier, up in Alaska. And Muir Woods. But there's even a mountain named for you — you know the one — just a peak or so south of Mt. Whitney, where you danced the Highland Fling that clear, cold night in 1873 to keep from freezing.

And there's a freeway named for you too, John. A freeway is a concrete roadway about as long and wide as a glacier — and with about the same consequences for any land that might be in its path. The Muir Freeway goes right past your house in Martinez, which, incidentally, is now a national historic monument. Oh! and they built a University here in San Diego and named one of its branches the John Muir College. Nice gesture, isn't it? — though a little ironic, since you found the best of life's lessons in the University of the Wilderness.

Speaking of irony, they've even built a *trail* 212 miles long from your beloved Yosemite Valley south to Mt. Whitney. It's called the John Muir Trail, and lots of hikers think you pioneered it, or even built it! Funny that you spent a whole life inviting people to experience the pathless wilderness, and they go and build a trail right through it.

John, believe it or not, there's even been an actor going around the state impersonating you! Did a nice job, too. He dressed up like we imagine you did in 1913, and walked about on a stage he'd fixed up to look like your second story "scribble den" at Martinez.

He told unusual stories about you: about the time when you were ten, and your father burst into the living room of your house in Dunbar, Scotland, to tell you and your brothers there was no need to do homework that night because you were "goin' to America in the morn."

And he told about your young years on the Wisconsin farms. They've turned part of your first farm, Fountain Lake, into Muir County Park, and the local Sierra Club is trying to raise money to buy the rest of the old farm from some guy before he builds 200 condominiums on it. And your second farm at Hickory Hill is *still* a working farm, though the owner — and most farmers in America — are having a tough time with it. The cold, dark cellar which you helped build and where you made those crazy wooden clocks and inventions, is still there, and the ax marks you made while chipping away at the oak beams can still be seen. That well you dug is

there too — the one in which you almost died from poison gas — but it's been sealed off now since pesticides have poisoned all the area's ground water.

Anyway, I went to the play the other night up at John Muir College with about 20 of my high school students. Remember when you accidentally pierced your right eye in that Indianapolis factory? It almost cost you your sight, and that was the moment when you decided to turn your back on machines and money, and instead (as I think you said it) "to get as close to the heart of the world as I can." The students especially liked that part. And they liked it when you (the actor, that is) told about coming to Yosemite in 1868, and about the joy you found there, and how you finally helped convince the nation to preserve it as a national park.

The play ended, John, with you hearing the news that Congress had passed a law to construct a dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley. Yes, John, although you didn't live to see it, the dam was built, and Hetch Hetchy was flooded. It is still flooded, a man-made monument to human short-sightedness. You lost that fight, John, and some think it cost you your life. But what goes up can come down, right? Who knows? Maybe one of the students who saw the play will become governor or president, get this country to dismantle the dam, and let Hetch Hetchy become wild once again. Anything's possible, eh John? You'd be surprised at who gets elected president these days and the things they say and do. No, maybe you wouldn't.

Did I mention the Sierra Club? John, the little club you started back in '92 has survived well over the years. It's had its lumps, and its battles won and lost. But it has members all over the country now — people like yourself who know that in order to survive we *must* become stewards of the Earth. They like going to the mountains to get their good tidings, and letting their cares drop off like autumn leaves, as you advised us to do. But thank goodness, they, like you, have been willing to fight to save and preserve what's left of this planet's wild places. They've taken to heart your advice that we should not just be *on* this Earth — but *in* it. They have discovered that "going out is really going in."

One last thing, John. Thanks for insisting that each of us should take time away from both money-making and do-gooding, and wander away now and then, to drift among the heather or saunter around a Sierra peak or meadow, to spend a day or a week in the mountains — not so much so that we can be in *them* as so *they* can be in us.

Happy birthday, John. Some of us will be in Yosemite this month, looking at your valley. If you find some time, please come down from Fern Ledge, or from the folds and mazes of Yosemite's falls, or wherever it is you are, and say hello. We'll serve you up a cup of tea and slice you a big hunk of fresh, crusty bread, and you can warm yourself around our campfire before you continue your wanderings.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Engberg

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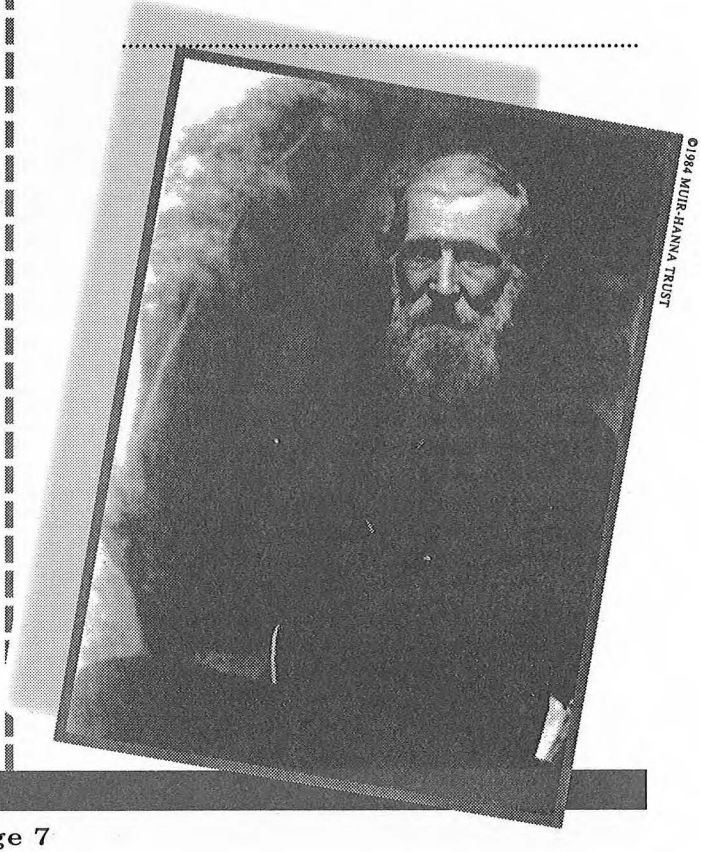

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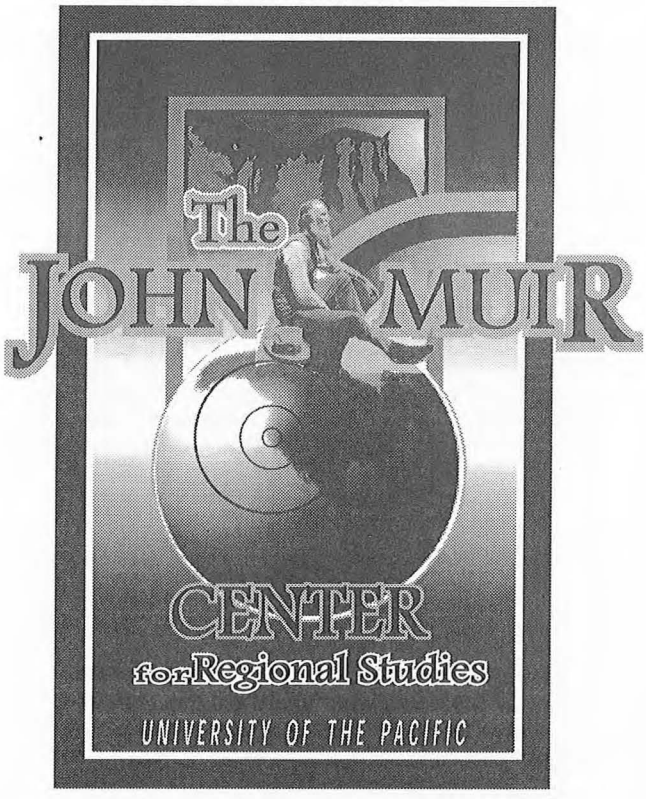

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VOLUME 8, NUMBER 3 SUMMER 1998

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